

KENNETH E. BAILEY



# Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes

CULTURAL STUDIES IN THE GOSPELS



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**KENNETH E. BAILEY**

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To

DAVID MARK BAILEY

With Deep Gratitude for his Choice of Hope over Despair

And for His Songs in the Night

With Unfading Love

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# Preface

THIS BOOK CAME ABOUT IN STAGES. Some of its chapters were originally transcriptions of professionally recorded video lectures. The meticulous work of transcription was done by my dear friend and colleague, Dr. Dale Bowne, professor of New Testament (emeritus), Grove City College. I am profoundly grateful to him for all his hard work both in transcribing and in commencing the process of transforming lecture-style material into readable prose.

Other chapters are composed of new material on studies of parables that I published nearly three decades ago. The majority of these chapters are presented here for the first time. I am deeply grateful to InterVarsity Press for the privilege of making these findings available to readers interested in examining texts in the light of traditional Middle Eastern culture.

The chapters are a selection. The birth of Jesus, Beatitudes, prayer, women in the ministry of Jesus, dramatic actions and parables are included. The goal is to offer brief glimpses of some of the treasures that await us as Western isolation from Middle Eastern Christian interpretation of the Bible is slowly brought to an end. My purpose is to add new perspectives to our understanding of the text, rather than to rearrange old ones.

I am grateful also to Joel Scandrett, my editor and friend, who has patiently guided this project from beginning to end. Always helpful and insightful, he has wisely urged me to strengthen the work in places of weakness and to clarify the text in places of obscurity. To him I am profoundly indebted.

My debt to my personal copy editor, Sara Bailey Makari, can never be paid. She has broken up my convoluted sentences, straightened my shifting tenses, identified many points of confusion and eliminated excess verbiage. In short, she has contributed enormously to whatever quality the final product may exhibit. Thank you, Sara.

For more than two decades I have had the rare privilege of the sound advice and wise council of an “advisory committee” comprising members of the Presbytery of

Shenango (PCUSA) and more recently of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh. This highly qualified group of people now includes the Rev. Dr. William Crooks; Rev. Dr. David Dawson; Rev. Dr. Joseph Hopkins; Mr. Thomas Mansell, Attorney at Law; Rev. Pamela Malony; Mr. William McKnight, CPA; and Rev. Dr. Ann Paton. To all these dear friends I wish to express my long-term gratitude and indebtedness.

Many churches and individuals, known and anonymous, have helped support my continuing research efforts. Without their assistance I would not have been able to acquire the resources or complete the work of writing this book. I think particularly of the Eastminster Presbyterian Church, Wichita, Kansas, and Trinity Presbyterian Church, Mercer, Pennsylvania. To all of them I offer my sincere thanks.

The more than ten million Arabic-speaking Christians of the Middle East can trace their origins to the day of Pentecost, where some of those present were from Arabia and heard the preaching of Peter in Arabic. Two bishops from Bahrain attended the Council of Nicaea.<sup>1</sup> Arabic-speaking Christian theologians and exegetes from roughly A.D. 900 to 1400 produced five centuries of the highest quality Christian scholarship, quality that is also found in the present.

For forty years it was the greatest privilege of my life to have been accepted, encouraged, loved, sustained, taught and directed by the living inheritors of that Semitic Christian world. For the good days and the hard days, together through wars and rumors of wars, I would thank them all. This book is but a flawed attempt to learn from their (and our) heritage and through it to try to think more clearly about the life and message of Jesus of Nazareth.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*  
*Kenneth E. Bailey*

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<sup>1</sup>Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1984), p. 330.

# Introduction

FOR SIXTY YEARS, FROM 1935-1995, my home was in the Middle East. With a childhood in Egypt and forty years spent teaching New Testament in seminaries and institutes in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem and Cyprus, my academic efforts have focused on trying to understand more adequately the stories of the Gospels in the light of Middle Eastern culture. This book is a part of that continuing endeavor.

The written sources for such a quest are ancient, medieval and modern. As regards *ancient* literature (Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac and Arabic), I am not solely interested in the Old Testament, the intertestamental literature, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The post-New Testament Jewish literature (Mishnah, Midrash Rabbah and the two Talmuds) is also important. In addition to Judaica, there is the literature of the Eastern Semitic-speaking churches.

Writing about the importance of the Eastern Christian tradition, John Meyendorff says:

The idea that the early Christian tradition was limited to its Greek and Latin expressions is still widespread. This assumption distorts historical reality and weakens greatly our understanding of the roots of Christian theology and spirituality. In the third and fourth centuries Syriac was the third international language of the church. It served as the major means of communication in the Roman diocese of the "East," which included Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia.<sup>1</sup>

Middle Eastern Christians have been called the forgotten faithful. The world knows that across the centuries there have been Jews and Muslims in the Middle East. For the most part, however, Middle Eastern Christians evaporated from Western consciousness after the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. Few are aware of the existence today of more than ten million Arabic-speaking Christians who

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<sup>1</sup>John Meyendorff, preface to *Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns*, trans. Kathleen McVey (New York: Paulist, 1989), p. 1.

possess a rich heritage of ancient and modern literature. Speaking a Semitic language, these Christians are a people who live, breathe, think, act and participate in Middle Eastern culture; they are rooted in the traditional ways of the Middle East. Their voices, past and present, need to be heard in biblical studies.

In an attempt to listen to those voices, this set of essays makes use of early Syriac and Arabic Christian literature on the Gospels. Syriac is a sister language to the Aramaic of Jesus. Arabic-speaking Christianity began on the day of Pentecost when some of those present heard the preaching of Peter in Arabic. In the early centuries, Arabic-speaking Christianity is known to have been widespread in the Yemen, Bahrain, Qatar and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> With the rise of Islam, Arabic gradually became the major theological language for all Eastern Christians. Centuries of high quality Arabic Christian literature remain, for the most part, unpublished and unknown.<sup>3</sup> All of these sources, Syriac, Hebrew/Aramaic and Arabic, share the broader culture of the ancient Middle East, and all of them are ethnically closer to the Semitic world of Jesus than the Greek and Latin cultures of the West.

Out of that earliest period emerged the writings of Ephrem the Syrian and the three classical translations of the Gospel into Syriac: the Old Syriac, the Peshitta and the Harclean, all three of which have been consulted for this book.

Beginning in the eighth century, the early Arabic Christian tradition becomes important. Starting with the early medieval period, the most outstanding Middle Eastern New Testament scholar I have discovered thus far is Abu al-Faraj Abdallah Ibn al-Tayyib al-Mashriqi, most commonly known as Ibn al-Tayyib. This outstanding scholar of Baghdad died in A.D. 1043. Georg Graf describes him as "Philosoph, Arzt, Monch und Priester in einer Person."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, he was a Renaissance man five hundred years before the Renaissance. Fully competent and widely read in Greek, Ibn al-Tayyib was also a trained medical doctor who taught medicine and authored medical texts. As a scholar he translated the New Testament from Syriac into Arabic, authored philosophical and theological works, edited an Arabic version of the Diatessaron and wrote commentaries on the Old and New Testaments.<sup>5</sup> His work on the Gospels is quoted repeatedly in this book.

A second major voice from the medieval period is the Coptic scholar Hibat

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<sup>2</sup>J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longmans, 1979).

<sup>3</sup>Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, 5 vols. (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944-1953).

<sup>4</sup>Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, 2:160.

<sup>5</sup>Albert Abuna, *Adab al-Lughah al-Aramiyya* (Literature in the Aramaic Language) (Beirut: Starko Press, 1980), pp. 417-18.

Allah ibn al-'Assal, who in 1252 completed a critical edition of the four Gospels with a full apparatus. His work is an amazing compendium of how the text was translated from Greek, Coptic and Syriac into Arabic over the centuries before his day.<sup>6</sup> Diyunisiyus Ja'qub ibn al-Salibi's (d. A.D. 1171) commentaries on the Gospels have also been consulted.

As regards the *modern period*, I have relied on Ibrahim Sa'id, a prominent Egyptian Protestant scholar who in the twentieth century produced able commentaries in Arabic on *Luke* and *John*. In addition, I have turned again and again to Matta al-Miskin, the Coptic Orthodox scholar who died in 2006. This learned monk, who nearly became the patriarch of his church, spent decades of his monastic life writing commentaries on the New Testament in Arabic. His six large volumes on the Gospels are stunning and unknown outside the Arabic-speaking Christian world.

Beyond the commentaries, ancient and modern, lie the versions. I am convinced that the Arabic Bible has the longest and most illustrious history of any language tradition. The ancient Christian traditions translated the New Testament into Latin, Coptic, Armenian and Syriac. But by the fifth century those translation efforts stopped.<sup>7</sup> Arabic New Testaments have survived from perhaps the eighth and certainly the ninth century. They were translated from Syriac, Coptic and Greek, and continued to be refined and renewed up until modern times.<sup>8</sup> Translation is always interpretation, and these versions preserve understandings of the text that were current in the churches that produced them. They are a gold mine for recovering Eastern exegesis of the Gospels.

These essays not only focus on culture but also on rhetoric. The peoples of the Middle East, ancient and modern, have for millennia constructed poetry and some prose using parallelisms. Known to the West as "Hebrew parallelisms" they are used widely in the Old Testament. But, early in the Hebrew literary tradition, these parallelisms were put together into what I have chosen to call "prophetic homilies." The building blocks of these homilies are various combinations of the Hebrew parallelisms. Sometimes ideas are presented in pairs that form a straight-line sequence and appear on the page in an AA BB CC pattern. At other times, ideas are presented and then repeated backward in an A B CC B A outline. These can be called "inverted parallelism" (they are also named "ring composition" and

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<sup>6</sup>Kenneth E. Bailey, "Hibat Allah Ibn al-'Assal and His Arabic Thirteenth Century Critical Edition of the Gospels," *Theological Review* (Beirut) 1 (1978): 11-26.

<sup>7</sup>The one exception to this is the Harclean Syriac which was completed in A.D. 614.

<sup>8</sup>I. Guidi, "Le traduzione degle Evangelii in arabo e in ethopico," *Tipografia della Reale Accademia dei Lincei*, vol. CCLXXV (1888): pp. 5-37.

“chiasm”). A third rhetorical style I refer to as “step parallelism” because the parallelisms follow an ABC ABC pattern. Often these three basic styles are combined in a single homily. One finely crafted early example of such a combination of rhetorical styles appears in Isaiah 28, as seen in figure 0.1:

Therefore <i>hear the word of the LORD</i> , you scoffers, who <i>rule</i> this people <i>in Jerusalem!</i>		
Because you have said,		
1.	a. “We have made a <i>covenant with death</i> ,	
	b. and <i>with Sheol we have an agreement:</i>	COVENANT MADE WITH
	c. when the <i>overwhelming scourge passes through</i>	Death, Sheol
	d. it will <i>not come to us</i> ;	
2.	a. for we have made <i>lies our refuge</i> ,	REFUGE
	b. and <i>in falsehood we have taken shelter;</i> ”	Shelter made
	therefore thus says the Lord God,	
3.	“Behold, I am laying in <i>Zion for a foundation</i>	BUILDING
	<i>a stone, a tested stone,</i>	Material
	<i>a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation:</i>	
4.	‘He who <i>believes</i> [in it—LXX]	INSCRIPTION
	<i>will not be shaken.</i> ’	
5.	And I will make <i>justice the line</i> ,	BUILDING
	and <i>righteousness the plummet;</i>	Tools
6.	a. and <i>hail will sweep away the refuge of lies</i> ,	REFUGE
	b. and <i>waters will overwhelm the shelter.</i> ”	Shelter destroyed
7.	a. Then <i>your covenant with death will be annulled</i> ,	
	b. and <i>your agreement with Sheol will not stand;</i>	COVENANT ANNULLED WITH
	c. when the <i>overwhelming scourge passes through</i>	Death, Sheol
	d. you will be <i>beaten down by it.</i>	

Figure 0.1. Isaiah’s parable of the two builders (Is 28:14–18)

A number of rhetorical features are prominent in this homily. Among them are:

- The homily has seven stanzas. Those stanzas are *inverted*, with stanza 1 matching 7, stanza 2 matching 6, and stanza 3 matching 5. The center (stanza 4) is the climax, where the prophet calls on the people to *believe* and *not be shaken*. This distinct rhetorical style, with its seven stanzas, is so early and so widely used that it deserves a name. I have chosen to call it the “prophetic rhetorical

template.” It appears in Psalm 23. Seventeen of these also appear in the Gospel of Mark. By New Testament times therefore, this style was at least a thousand years old.

- Stanza 1 relates to stanza 7 using “step parallelism.” When placed side by side these comparisons are evident:
  1. a. “We have made a *covenant with death*,
  - b. and *with Sheol we have an agreement*;                      COVENANT MADE WITH
  - c. when the *overwhelming scourge passes through*      Death, Sheol
  - d. it will *not come to us*;
  7. a. Then *your covenant with death* will be *annulled*,
  - b. and your *agreement with Sheol* will *not stand*;      COVENANT ANNULLED WITH
  - c. when the *overwhelming scourge passes through*      Death, Sheol
  - d. you will be *beaten down by it*.

Clearly, the four statements in stanza 7 match and flatly contradict what is said in stanza 1. Stanzas 1c and 7c are identical.

- A quick glance at stanzas 2 and 6 exhibit the same kind of relationships. Only, in this case, Isaiah is using two ideas in each step of his step parallelism. These ideas have to do with the “refuge and the shelter.” In the first, the refuge and shelter are standing. In the second, they are destroyed.
- Stanzas 3 and 5 also match, but in a different way. The first lists the promised new foundation stone. The second describes the building tools to be used. The “line” (the horizontal) will be “justice,” and the “plummet” (the vertical) will be “righteousness.” To build a stone house the mason must have building materials (3) and the tools with which to build (5). These two stanzas are clearly a match.
- The climax in the center focuses on the promised blessing of faith. The building they have built (the refuge and shelter) will shake and fall. But with faith (in God) they *will not be shaken*. Furthermore, as is usual, the center relates to the beginning and the end. The rulers of Jerusalem have a “covenant with death” (1) that will not stand (7). The one who “believes” (4) will alone be unshaken. The center (4) is composed of two lines and 4a relates to 1 while 4b connects with 7. This can be seen as:
  4. a. He who *believes*      (relates to 1 with its “covenant/agreement,” which by its very nature demands some level of “belief”)
  - b. Will *not be shaken*      (relates to 7 where “not stand” and “beaten down” characterize the worthless covenant *that will be shaken*)

This kind of analysis may be seen by some as “interesting” and “artistically sat-

isfying,” but is it significant for interpretation? For centuries the church has generally seen most of the texts examined in this book as having a straight-line, “this after that” order. All the rhetorical patterns here displayed may or may not be convincing to you, but even if *some* are judged to be valid, what difference does it make? A few comments on this important question may be helpful.

1. If the author is presenting his or her case using an ABC CBA structure, then half of what he or she has to say about “A” will appear in the first line and the other half must be read in line six. The same is true of the second line (B) and the fifth line (B), which again form a pair. To miss this pairing of ideas is to miss an important part of how the speaker or author is presenting the case.
2. “Inverted parallelism” places the climax in the center, not at the end. As noted, this rhetorical style is often referred to as “ring composition” because the author’s mind moves in a circle and returns to the subject with which he or she began. A simple case of this phenomenon appears in Luke 16:13, which is composed in the following manner:

No man can serve *two masters*;  
 Either he will *hate* the one  
           and *love* the other,  
           or be *devoted* to the one  
           and *despise* the other.

You cannot serve *God and mammon*.

By pairing the first and last lines it is clear that the two masters Jesus is discussing are *God* and *material possessions*. Each asserts authority over the life of the believer, and a fundamental choice about who will be allowed mastery must be made. In addition, the climax appears in the center where love and devotion to one master (God) is urged. Logically trained minds assume that the climax always occurs at the end. When this is not the case, the interpreter needs to know how to find it.

3. Where a particular narrative begins and ends can often be determined with much greater certainty when the rhetorical form is uncovered. Paul has a great hymn to the cross which is recorded in 1 Corinthians 1:17—2:2. The Western division for chapter two is in the wrong place. This hymn opens with reference to the preaching of Christ crucified. Christ crucified appears in the middle and again at the end.<sup>9</sup> The rhetorical style identifies the beginning and the end of

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<sup>9</sup>Kenneth E. Bailey, “Recovering the Poetic Structure of I Corinthians i 17–ii 2: A Study in Text and Commentary,” *Novum Testamentum* 17 (October 1975): 265–96.

this masterpiece and allows us to reflect on it as a whole.

4. Rhetorical analysis exposes the smaller sections, which allows them to maintain their integrity rather than to be neglected or broken up into separate verses.
5. Rhetorical analysis delivers the reader from the tyranny of the number system. The text is permitted its own ordering of ideas. The numbers, however useful they are for finding one's place, subtly dictate to the reader, "you *Will* see these ideas or stories as a straight line sequence which follows the numbers." Rhetorical analysis frees us from 1,650 years of dominance by chapter headings and 450 years of subtle control by verse numbers.
6. At times the rhetorical order of the material is an important internal component to help make decisions regarding which Greek reading to select. External evidence regarding which texts are the oldest and most reliable is very important. Internal evidence of the rhetorical styles involved also deserves consideration.
7. The parallels between stanzas (straight line, inverted or step) often unlock important meanings otherwise lost. In Isaiah 28:14-18, Isaiah is discussing the national threat of the coming of the Assyrian army under the dreaded Sennacherib. The leaders who "rule . . . in Jerusalem" (v. 14) had made a covenant with Egypt and were telling the people that everyone was safe as a result. Isaiah was not convinced. The Egyptian world focused on a cult of the dead. Isaiah refers to the covenant with Egypt as a "covenant with death" (read: Egypt). The prophet presents the government's case in stanza 1 and then demolishes it line by line in stanza 7. We need to be able to observe him engaged in his devastating critique.
8. Occasionally in the Gospels there are carefully balanced sets of lines, to which some "footnotes" have been added. This is the case in Luke 12:35-38, where the phrase "in the second or third watch of the night" breaks the balance of the lines. A second "footnote" appears in the second half of Luke 4:25. These explanatory notes can be spotted when the basic rhetorical structure is identified. Such "footnotes" affirm the antiquity of the underlying text.
9. As noted, these rhetorical styles are Jewish and can be traced to the writing prophets and beyond. The reappearance of these same styles in the New Testament makes clear that the texts involved came out of a Jewish, not a Greek world. The case for the historical authenticity of the material is thereby strengthened.

10. All the intelligent people were not born in the twentieth century. When we observe these sophisticated, thoughtful and artistically balanced rhetorical styles, we form a high opinion of their authors.

Rhetorical analysis of biblical texts is like playing the saxophone: it is easy to do poorly.<sup>10</sup> The rhetorical analysis here offered is a start and further refinement is inevitable.

In the West the inspiration of Scripture is rarely discussed as part of biblical studies. Paul Achtemeier observes that the doctrine of inspiration “within the past two or three decades, has been notable more by its absence than its presence. It has been honored by being ignored in many circles.”<sup>11</sup> Middle Eastern churches have lived as a minority within a sea of Islam for more than a thousand years. In such a world Scripture’s inspiration cannot be avoided. The world of Islam believes that the Qur’an was dictated by the angel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad in seventh-century Bedouin Arabic, one chapter at a time over a ten year period. The material itself is affirmed to be both uncreated and eternal in the mind of God and cannot be translated. The phrase used to describe this event is “nuzul al-Qur’an” (the descent of the Qur’an). The same verb describes the “descent” of a mountain climber from a high peak. It is a preexistent whole that “comes down” from the heights.

Early illuminated manuscripts of the Gospels often contain a drawing on the first page of an angel dictating to the Gospel author.<sup>12</sup> On the popular level, in certain circles, there is an unspoken yearning for the certainty that comes with the Islamic understanding of inspiration.

But our Greek text does not allow for such a theory. Instead, we are obliged to consider four stages through which our canonical Gospels have passed. These are:

1. the *life and teaching* of Jesus of Nazareth in *Aramaic*
2. the Aramaic *eyewitness testimony* to that life and teaching<sup>13</sup>
3. the *translation* of that *testimony* into *Greek*
4. the selection, arrangement and editing of those *Greek texts* into *Gospels*

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<sup>10</sup>For a list of eight “words of caution” in the practice of rhetorical analysis, see Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, in *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. xix-xx.

<sup>11</sup>Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup>This view is as old (2nd cent. B.C.) as the book of Jubilees 2:27; 2:1.

<sup>13</sup>See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

With these stages in mind, it is necessary to discuss the inspiration of the Gospels as a *process* that took thirty to fifty-plus years to complete. If we are only interested in the first stage, we opt for “a canon within a canon.” For the last fifty years I have followed the Western debate over these matters with great care and interest.<sup>14</sup> But to ignore the process and grant significance only to the first stage is to deny the way any significant history is remembered and recorded.

Kenneth Cragg, the distinguished Anglican Islamic scholar, discussed the nature of the Gospels in a sermon preached at All Saints Episcopal Cathedral, Cairo, Egypt, on January 16, 1977. On that occasion he said:

Much in current Western scientific mentality has been tempted to deny the status of ‘fact’ (and so of truth) to everything not demonstrable in test-tubes or provable by ‘verification’. This instinctive reductionism of many contemporary philosophers sadly prevents them from reckoning with the historical meaning of faith and the deep inter-relation of both event, and mystery.

Let us take help from a parable. November 22 (Texas), 1963. Suppose I say: “A man with a rifle from a warehouse window shot and killed another man in a passing car.” Every word here is true (assuming we accept the Warren Commission). But how bleak and meager the facts are – so sparse as to be almost no facts at all. The event is not told at all. But suppose I go further and say: “The President of the United States was assassinated.” This is more deeply factual because it is more fully related. The victim is identified, the killing is told as political, and the perspective is truer. But we are still a long way from the meaning of the tragedy. Let us attempt a further statement: “Men everywhere felt that they had looked into the abyss of evil and people wept in the streets.”

That third statement tugs at the heart. It is true with a different sort of truth. It pre-supposes what the others state, but goes beyond into dimensions that begin to satisfy the nature of the fearful things that happened. Without something like that third story the event would remain concealed in a part-told obscurity so remote as to be, in measure, false.

Now let us set the Gospels, and the whole New Testament, in the light of this parable. Clearly they are the third kind of statement, deeply involving heart and mind in a confession of experienced meaning – meaning tied intimately to history and to event. That is the way it is with Jesus – not neutrality, bare record, empty chronology, but living participation and heart involvement. For Jesus’ story, like all significant history, cannot be told without belonging with the telling in mind and soul.

Christian faith is fact, but not bare fact; it is poetry, but not imagination. Like the arch which grows stronger precisely by dint of the weight you place upon it, so the

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<sup>14</sup>See Achtemeier, *Inspiration of Scripture*.

story of the Gospels bears, with reassuring strength, the devotion of the centuries to Jesus as the Christ. What is music, asked Walt Whitman, but what awakens within you when you listen to the instrument? And Jesus is the music of the reality of God, and faith is what awakens when we hearken.<sup>15</sup>

In harmony with what Kenneth Cragg has written, and within the perspective of the understanding of inspiration outlined here, these studies will attempt to examine the texts “holistically.”

Perhaps the editors of television documentaries are the closest modern counterpart to the compilers/authors of the Gospels. The editor of a television documentary must select, arrange, edit and provide voice-over commentary for all that he or she presents. If that editor is “open minded,” there will be a serious attempt to present the subject fairly. The word *fairly* means “in harmony with the editor’s deepest perceptions as to the truth about the subject.”

Many contemporary commentaries on the Gospels, understandable and rightly, expend enormous energies debating the “primary” or “secondary” nature of the material. Is this or that word or phrase traceable to Jesus or to his Jewish followers or the Greek church? I am convinced that the Gospels are history theologically interpreted. In harmony with what has previously been said about inspiration, I grant that the Spirit of God was given to Jesus (Mk 1:9-11) but also to the church (Acts 2:1-4) that remembered him. Separating, therefore, the exact words of Jesus from the careful editing of the Gospel authors is not the intent of these studies. The theological-historical drama of the text will be examined as a creative whole.

A full-fledged technical commentary is also not the goal of this book. I am aware of opinions other than my own and have followed and engaged in the various strands of debate in the Western New Testament guild over the last half century. This book, however, is not intended to interact with the great volume of current literature on the texts presented, a task that has already been ably accomplished by Joseph Fitzmyer, Arnold Hultgren, I. Howard Marshall and others.<sup>16</sup>

Hopefully, nontechnically trained readers will be able to follow the enclosed discussions with ease. With no presumptuous comparisons intended, the goal is to present a Middle Eastern cultural commentary somewhat patterned after *Read-*

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<sup>15</sup>Kenneth Cragg, “Who is Jesus Christ?” An unpublished sermon preached by Bishop Cragg at All Saints Episcopal Cathedral, Cairo, Egypt on Sunday, January 16, 1977.

<sup>16</sup>Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1981); Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster, 1978).

*ings in St. John's Gospel* by the former archbishop of Canterbury William Temple.<sup>17</sup> The work of Lesslie Newbigin on John's Gospel also comes to mind.<sup>18</sup>

My intent is to contribute new perspectives from the Eastern tradition that have rarely, if ever, been considered outside the Arabic-speaking Christian world. It is my fond hope that these essays may help the reader to better understand the mind of Christ, and the mind of the Gospel author/editors as they recorded and interpreted the traditions available to them. The reader will decide if I have in any way succeeded.

All of the quotations from Arabic sources recorded in this book are my own translations. It seems pedantic to constantly repeat "my translation" at the end of each of them. I am alone responsible for any errors. However, I do identify where I have translated texts from Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Syriac. In the biblical texts quoted, I have worked with the Revised Standard Version and occasionally made my own translations from the Greek. Where I present the rhetorical structure of a text, I use the RSV, but I occasionally revise this translation on the basis of the Greek text.

The texts studied here are grand texts that have inspired the faithful for nearly two millennia. Surely, "fear and trembling" must overtake any interpreter who dares to enter sacred space where candles burn on the altar. May it be so for writer and reader alike.

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<sup>17</sup>William Temple, *Readings in Saint John's Gospel*, 1st and 2nd ser. (London: Macmillan, 1955).

<sup>18</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

PART ONE

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The Birth of Jesus

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# The Story of Jesus' Birth

LUKE 2:1-20

THE TRADITIONAL EVENTS OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY are well-known to all Christians. The birth of Jesus includes three wise men bearing gifts, shepherds in the fields in mid-winter, a baby born in a stable and “no room in the inn.” These aspects of the account are firmly fixed in the popular mind. The question becomes: Is there a critical distinction to be made between the text and the traditional understanding of it? Have the centuries added meanings to our understanding of the text that are not there?<sup>1</sup>

A diamond ring is admired and worn with pride, but with the passing of time, it needs to be taken to a jeweler to be cleaned to restore its original brilliance. The more the ring is worn, the greater the need for occasional cleaning. The more familiar we are with a biblical story, the more difficult it is to view it outside of the way it has always been understood. And the longer imprecision in the tradition remains unchallenged, the deeper it becomes embedded in Christian consciousness. The birth story of Jesus is such a story.

The traditional understanding of the account in Luke 2:1-18 contains a number of critical flaws. These include:

1. Joseph was returning to the village of his origin. In the Middle East, historical memories are long, and the extended family, with its connection to its village of origin, is important. In such a world a man like Joseph could have appeared in Bethlehem, and told people, “I am Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat, the son of Levi” and most homes in town would be open to him.
2. Joseph was a “royal.” That is, he was from the family of King David. The family of David was so famous in Bethlehem that local folk apparently called the

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<sup>1</sup>For a technical discussion of this text see Kenneth E. Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7,” *Theological Review* 2 (1979): 33-44.

town the “City of David” (as often happens). The official name of the village was Bethlehem. Everyone knew that the Hebrew Scriptures referred to Jerusalem as the “City of David.” Yet locally, many apparently called Bethlehem the “City of David” (Lk 2:4). Being of that famous family, Joseph would have been welcome anywhere in town.

3. In every culture a woman about to give birth is given special attention. Simple rural communities the world over always assist one of their own women in childbirth regardless of the circumstances. Are we to imagine that Bethlehem was an exception? Was there no sense of honor in Bethlehem? Surely the *community* would have sensed its responsibility to help Joseph find adequate shelter for Mary and provide the care she needed. To turn away a descendent of David in the “City of David” would be an unspeakable shame on the entire village.
4. Mary had relatives in a nearby village. A few months prior to the birth of Jesus, Mary had visited her cousin Elizabeth “in the hill country of Judea” and was welcomed by her. Bethlehem was located in the center of Judea. By the time, therefore, that Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem they were but a short distance from the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. If Joseph had failed to find shelter in Bethlehem he would naturally have turned to Zechariah and Elizabeth. But did he have time for those few extra miles?
5. Joseph had time to make adequate arrangements. Luke 2:4 says that Joseph and Mary “went up from Galilee to Judea,” and verse 6 states, “*while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered*” (KJV, italics added).<sup>2</sup> The average Christian thinks that Jesus was born the same night the holy family arrived—hence Joseph’s haste and willingness to accept any shelter, even the shelter of a stable. Traditional Christmas pageants reinforce this idea year after year.

In the text, the time spent in Bethlehem before the birth is not specified. But it was surely long enough to find adequate shelter or to turn to Mary’s family. This late-night-arrival-imminent-birth myth is so deeply engrained in the popular Christian mind that it is important to inquire into its origin. Where did this idea come from?

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<sup>2</sup>Some modern translations hide the fact that a number of days passed in Bethlehem before Jesus was born. The original text (along with the King James Version) is precise.

## A CHRISTIAN NOVEL

The source of this misinterpretation stems from approximately two hundred years after the birth of Jesus, when an anonymous Christian wrote an expanded account of the birth of Jesus that has survived and is called *The Protevangelium of James*.<sup>3</sup> James had nothing to do with it. The author was not a Jew and did not understand Palestinian geography or Jewish tradition.<sup>4</sup> In that period many wrote books claiming famous people as the authors.

Scholars date this particular “novel” to around the year A.D. 200, and it is full of imaginative details. Jerome, the famous Latin scholar, attacked it as did many of the popes.<sup>5</sup> It was composed in Greek but translated into Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Coptic and old Slavonic. The author had clearly read the Gospel stories, but he (or she) was unfamiliar with the geography of the Holy Land. In the novel, for example, the author describes the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem as a desert. It is not a desert but rather rich farm land.<sup>6</sup> In the novel, as they approach Bethlehem, Mary says to Joseph, “Joseph, take me down from the ass, for the child within me presses me, to come forth.”<sup>7</sup> Responding to this request, Joseph leaves Mary in a cave and rushes off to Bethlehem to find a midwife. After seeing fanciful visions on the way, Joseph returns with the midwife (the baby has already been born) to be faced with a dark cloud and then a bright light overshadowing the cave. A woman by the name of Salome appears out of nowhere and meets the midwife who tells her that a virgin has given birth and is still a virgin. Salome expresses doubt at this marvel and her hand turns leprous as a result. After an examination, Mary’s claim is vindicated. Then an angel suddenly “stands” before Salome and tells her to touch the child. She does so and the diseased hand is miraculously healed—and the novel spins on from there. Authors of popular novels usually have good imaginations. An important part of this novel’s story line is that Jesus was born even before his parents arrived in Bethlehem. This novel is the earliest known reference to the notion that Jesus was born the night Mary and Joseph arrived in or near Bethlehem. The average Christian, who has never heard of this book, is nonetheless unconsciously influenced by it.<sup>8</sup> The novel

<sup>3</sup>Oscar Cullman, “Infancy Gospels,” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 1:370-88.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 372.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>6</sup>I lived on that road for ten years, and at that time it ran through flourishing olive orchards.

<sup>7</sup>*The Protevangelium of James* 17:3, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

<sup>8</sup>Curiously, Codex Bezae (5th-6th century A.D.) changes the text to read “as they arrived she brought forth . . .” This change in the Greek text affirms the idea that Jesus was born just as they arrived.

is a fanciful expansion of the Gospel account, not the Gospel story itself.

To summarize the problems in the traditional interpretation of Luke 2:1-7, Joseph was returning to his home village where he could easily find shelter. Because he was a descendent of King David nearly all doors in the village were open to him. Mary had relatives nearby and could have turned to them but did not. There was plenty of time to arrange suitable housing. How could a Jewish town fail to help a young Jewish mother about to give birth? In the light of these cultural and historical realities, how are we to understand the text? Two questions arise: Where was the manger, and What was the “inn”?

In answer to both questions, it is evident that the story of the birth of Jesus (in Luke) is authentic to the geography and history of the Holy Land. The text records that Mary and Joseph “went up” from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Bethlehem is built on a ridge which is considerably higher than Nazareth.<sup>9</sup> Second, the title “City of David” was probably a local name to which Luke adds “which is called Bethlehem” for the benefit of nonlocal readers. Third, the text informs the reader that Joseph was “of the *house* and *lineage* of David.” In the Middle East, “the house of so-and-so” means “the family of so-and-so.” Greek readers of this account could have visualized a building when they read “house of David.” Luke may have added the term *lineage* to be sure his readers understood him. He did not change the text, which was apparently already fixed in the tradition when he received it (Lk 1:2). But he was free to add a few explanatory notes. Fourth, Luke mentions that the child was wrapped with swaddling cloths. This ancient custom is referred to in Ezekiel 16:4 and is still practiced among village people in Syria and Palestine. Finally, a Davidic Christology surfaces in the account. These five points emphasize that the story was composed by a messianic Jew at a very early stage in the life of the church.

For the Western mind the word *manger* invokes the words *stable* or *barn*. But in traditional Middle Eastern villages this is not the case. In the parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:13-21) there is mention of “storehouses” but not barns. People of great wealth would naturally have had separate quarters for animals.<sup>10</sup> But simple village homes in Palestine often had but two rooms. One was exclusively for guests. That room could be attached to the end of the house or be a “prophet’s chamber” on the roof, as in the story of Elijah (1 Kings 17:19). The main room was a “family room” where the entire family cooked, ate, slept and lived. The end of the room next to the door, was either a few feet lower than the rest of the floor or blocked off with

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<sup>9</sup>Nazareth is 1,600 feet above sea level, while Bethlehem is built on a ridge and is 2,250 feet high.

<sup>10</sup>Yizhar Hirschfeld with M. F. Vamosh, “A Country Gentleman’s Estate: Unearthing the Splendors of Ramat Hanadiv,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 31, no 2 (2005): 18-31.

heavy timbers. Each night into that designated area, the family cow, donkey and a few sheep would be driven. And every morning those same animals were taken out and tied up in the courtyard of the house. The animal stall would then be cleaned for the day. Such simple homes can be traced from the time of David up to the middle of the twentieth century. I have seen them both in Upper Galilee and in Bethlehem. Figure 1.1 illustrates such a house from the side.

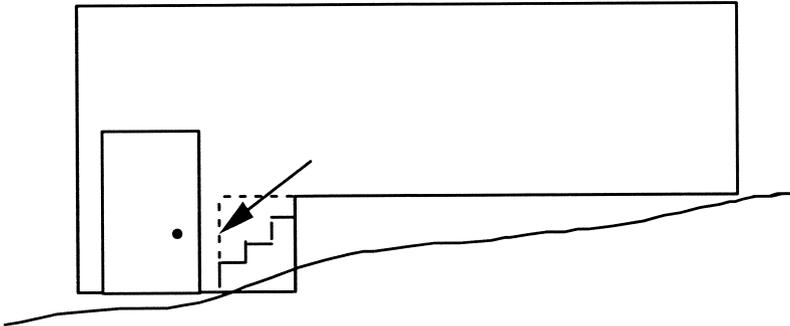


Figure 1.1. Typical village home in Palestine viewed from the side

The roof is flat and can have a guest room built on it, or a guest room can be attached to the end of the house. The door on the lower level serves as an entrance for people and animals. The farmer *wants* the animals in the house each night because they provide heat in winter and are safe from theft.

The same house viewed from above is illustrated in figure 1.2.

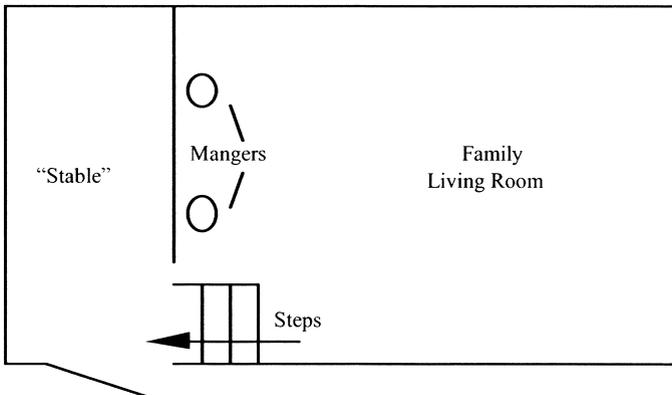


Figure 1.2. Typical village home in Palestine viewed from above

The elongated circles represent mangers dug out of the lower end of the living room. The “family living room” has a slight slope in the direction of the animal stall, which aids in sweeping and washing. Dirt and water naturally move downhill into the space for the animals and can be swept out the door. If the family cow is hungry during the night, she can stand up and eat from mangers cut out of the floor of the living room. Mangers for sheep can be of wood and placed on the floor of the lower level.

This style of traditional home fits naturally into the birth story of Jesus. But such homes are also implicit in Old Testament stories. In 1 Samuel 28, Saul was a guest in the house of the medium of Endor when the king refused to eat. The medium then took a fattened calf that was “in the house” (v. 24), killed it, and prepared a meal for the king and his servants. She did not fetch a calf from the field or the barn, but *from within the house*.

The story of Jephthah in Judges 11:29-40 assumes the same kind of one-room home. On his way to war, Jephthah makes a vow that if God will grant him victory on his return home he will sacrifice the first thing that comes out of his house. Jephthah wins his battle but as he returns home, tragically, and to his horror, his daughter is the first to step out of the house. Most likely he returned early in the morning and fully expected one of the animals to come bounding out of the room in which they had been cramped together all night. The text is not relating the story of a brutal butcher. The reader is obliged to assume that it never crossed his mind that a member of his family would step out first. Only with this assumption does the story make any sense. Had his home housed only human beings, he would never have made such a vow. If only people lived in the house, who was he planning to murder and why? The story is a *tragedy* because he expected *an animal*.

These same simple homes also appear in the New Testament. In Matthew 5:14-15, Jesus says,

“No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.”

Obviously, Jesus is assuming a typical village home with one room. If a single lamp sheds light on *everybody in the house*, that house can only have one room.

Another example of the same assumption appears in Luke 13:10-17 where on the sabbath Jesus healed a woman who “was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.” Jesus called to her and said, “Woman, you are *freed* [lit. untied] from your infirmity.” The head of the synagogue was angry because Jesus had “worked” on the sabbath. Jesus responded, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water

it?" (v. 15). His point being: Today, on the sabbath you untied an *animal*. I "untied" a *woman*. How can you blame me? The text reports that "all his adversaries were put to shame" (v. 17).

Clearly, Jesus knew that every night his opponents had at least an ox or an ass *in their houses*. That morning everyone in the room had taken animals out of houses and tied them up outside. The ruler of the synagogue did not reply, "Oh, I never touch the animals on the sabbath." It is unthinkable to leave animals in the house during the day, and there were no stables. One of the earliest and most carefully translated Arabic versions of the New Testament was made, probably in Palestine, in the ninth century. Only eight copies have survived. This great version (translated from the Greek) records this verse as: "does not every one of you untie his ox or his donkey from the manger *in the house* and take it outside and water it?"<sup>11</sup> No Greek manuscript has the words "in the house" in this text. But this ninth-century Arabic-speaking Christian translator understood the text correctly. Doesn't everybody have a manger in the house? In his world, simple Middle Eastern villagers always did!

The one-room village home with mangers has been noted by modern scholars as well. William Thompson, an Arabic-speaking Presbyterian missionary scholar of the mid-nineteenth century observed village homes in Bethlehem and wrote, "It is my impression that the birth actually took place in an ordinary house of some common peasant, and that the baby was laid in one of the mangers, such as are still found in the dwellings of farmers in this region."<sup>12</sup>

The Anglican scholar E. F. F. Bishop, who lived in Jerusalem from 1922 to 1950, wrote:

Perhaps . . . recourse was had to one of the Bethlehem houses with the lower section provided for the animals, with mangers "hollowed in stone," the dais being reserved for the family. Such a manger being immovable filled with crushed straw, would do duty for a cradle.<sup>13</sup>

For more than a hundred years scholars resident in the Middle East have understood Luke 2:7 as referring to a family room with mangers cut into the floor at one end. If this interpretation is pursued, there remains the question of the identity of "the inn." What precisely was it that was full?

If Joseph and Mary were taken into a private home and at birth Jesus was placed in a manger in that home, how is the word *inn* in Luke 2:7 to be under-

<sup>11</sup>Vatican Arabic MSS 95, Folio 71, italics added.

<sup>12</sup>William Thompson, *The Land and the Book* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871): 2:503.

<sup>13</sup>E. F. F. Bishop, *Jesus of Palestine* (London: Lutterworth, 1955), p. 42.

stood? Most English translations state that after the child was born, he was laid in a manger “because there was no room for them in the *inn*.” This sounds as if they were rejected by the people of Bethlehem. Was that really the case?

There is a trap in traditional language. “No room in the inn” has taken on the meaning of “the inn had a number of rooms and all were occupied.” The “no vacancy sign” was already “switched on” when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem. But the Greek word does not refer to “a room in an inn” but rather to “space” (*topos*) as in “There is no *space* on my desk for my new computer.” It is important to keep this correction in mind as we turn to the word we have been told was an “inn.”

The Greek word in Luke 2:7 that is commonly translated “inn” is *katalyma*. This is not the ordinary word for a commercial inn. In the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) the Samaritan takes the wounded man to an inn. The Greek word in that text is *pandocheion*. The first part of this word means “all.” The second part, as a verb, means “to receive.” The *pandocheion* is the place that receives all, namely a commercial inn. This common Greek term for an inn was so widely known across the Middle East that over the centuries it was absorbed as a Greek loan word into Armenian, Coptic, Arabic and Turkish with the same meaning—a commercial inn.

If Luke expected his readers to think Joseph was turned away from an “inn” he would have used the word *pandocheion*, which clearly meant a commercial inn. But in Luke 2:7 it is a *katalyma* that is crowded. What then does this word mean?

Literally, a *katalyma* is simply “a place to stay” and can refer to many types of shelters. The three that are options for this story are *inn* (the English translation tradition), *house* (the Arabic biblical tradition of more than one thousand years), and *guest room* (Luke’s choice). Indeed, Luke used this key term on one other occasion in his Gospel, where it is defined in the text itself. In Luke 22 Jesus tells his disciples:

Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house which he enters, and tell the householder, ‘The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room [*katalyma*] where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?’ And he will show you a large upper room furnished; there make ready. (Lk 22:10-12)

Here, the key word, *katalyma*, is defined; it is “an upper room,” which is clearly a *guest room in a private home*. This precise meaning makes perfect sense when applied to the birth story. In Luke 2:7 Luke tells his readers that Jesus was placed in a *manger* (in the family room) because in that home *the guest room* was already full.

If at the end of Luke's Gospel, the word *katalyma* means a guest room attached to a private home (22:11), why would it not have the same meaning near the beginning of his Gospel? The family room, with an attached guest room, would have looked something like the diagram below:

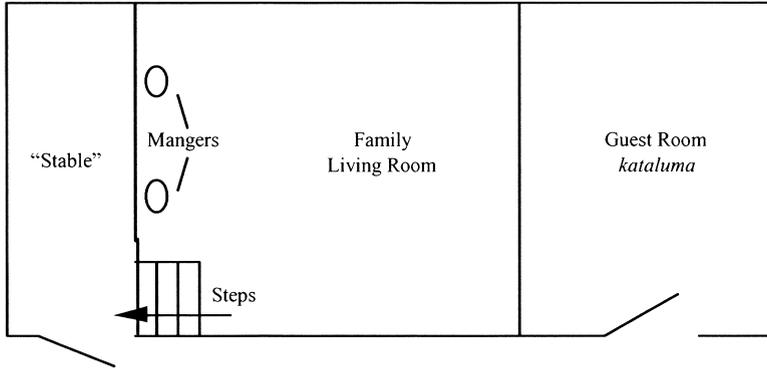


Figure 1.3. Typical village home in Palestine with attached guest room

This option for *katalyma* was chosen by Alfred Plummer in his influential commentary published in the late nineteenth century. Plummer writes, “It is a little doubtful whether the familiar translation ‘in the inn’ is correct. . . . It is possible that Joseph had relied upon the hospitality of some friend in Bethlehem, whose ‘guest-chamber,’ however, was already full when he and Mary arrived.”<sup>14</sup>

I. Howard Marshall makes the same observation but does not expand on its significance.<sup>15</sup> Fitzmyer calls the *katalyma* a “lodge,” which for him is a “public caravansary or khan.”<sup>16</sup> I am convinced that Plummer was right. If so, why was this understanding not adopted by the church, either in the East or the West?

In the West the church has not noticed the problems I have already listed. When the traditional understanding of the story, therefore, is “not broken,” it would seem that the best course to follow is “don’t fix it.” But once the problems with the traditional view of the text are clarified, they cry out for solutions. On the other side, in the East, the dominant Christian presence is the venerated Orthodox Church in its various branches. What of its traditions?

<sup>14</sup>Alfred Plummer, *Gospel According to S. Luke*, 5th ed., International Critical Commentary (1922; reprint, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), p. 54.

<sup>15</sup>Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup>Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)*, p. 408.

Christianity in the Middle East has traditionally focused on the birth having taken place in a cave. Many simple homes in traditional villages in the Holy Land begin in caves and are then expanded. The tradition of the cave can be traced to Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the second century. What I have already suggested is in harmony with this tradition. The Eastern tradition has always maintained that Mary was alone when the child was born. In worship even the altar is hidden from the eyes of the faithful, and the event of the elements becoming the body and blood of Jesus (in the Eucharist) takes place out of sight. How much more should the “Word that became flesh” take place without witnesses? Father Matta al-Miskin, a twentieth-century Coptic Orthodox scholar and monk who wrote six weighty commentaries in Arabic on the four Gospels, reflects with wonder on Saint Mary alone in the cave. He writes:

My heart goes out to this solitary mother.  
 How did she endure labor pains alone?  
 How did she receive her child with her own hands?  
 How did she wrap him while her strength was totally exhausted?  
 What did she have to eat or drink?  
 O women of the world, witness this mother of the Savior.  
 How much did she suffer and how much does she deserve honor,  
 . . . along with our tenderness and love?<sup>17</sup>

This genuine and touching piety is naturally not interested in considering birth in a private home with all the care and support that other women would have given. Therefore, among Christians, East and West, there have been understandable reasons why a new understanding of this text has been neglected.

To summarize, a part of what Luke tells us about the birth of Jesus is that the holy family traveled to Bethlehem, where they were received into a private home. The child was born, wrapped and (literally) “put to bed” (*anaklinō*) in the living room in the manger that was either built into the floor or made of wood and moved into the family living space. Why weren’t they invited into the family guest room, the reader might naturally ask? The answer is that the guest room was already occupied by other guests. The host family graciously accepted Mary and Joseph into the family room of their house.

The family room would, naturally, be cleared of men for the birth of the child, and the village midwife and other women would have assisted at the birth. After the child was born and wrapped, Mary put her newborn to bed in a manger filled

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<sup>17</sup>Matta al-Miskin, *al-Injil, bi-Hasab Bisharat al-Qiddis Luqa* (Cairo: Dayr al-Qiddis Anba Maqar, 1998), p. 128 (my translation).

with fresh straw and covered him with a blanket. When Jesus engaged in ministry as an adult “The common people heard him gladly” (Mk 12:37 KJV). That same acceptance was evident at his birth. What then of the shepherds?

The story of the shepherds reinforces the picture I have presented. Shepherds in first century Palestine were poor, and rabbinic traditions label them as unclean.<sup>18</sup> This may seem peculiar because Psalm 23 opens with “The LORD is my shepherd.” It is not clear how such a lofty metaphor evolved into an unclean profession. The main point seems to be that flocks ate private property.<sup>19</sup> Five lists of “proscribed trades” are recorded in rabbinic literature and shepherds appear in three out of the five.<sup>20</sup> These lists hail from post-New Testament times but could reflect developing ideas alive at the time of Jesus. In any case, they were lowly, uneducated types.

In Luke 2:8-14 the first people to hear the message of the birth of Jesus were a group of shepherds who were close to the bottom of the social scale in their society. The shepherds heard and were afraid. Initially, they were probably frightened by the sight of the angels, but later they were asked to *visit* the child! From their point of view, if the child was truly the Messiah, the parents would reject the shepherds if they tried to visit him! How could shepherds be convinced to expect a welcome?

The angels anticipated this anxiety and told the shepherds they would find the baby wrapped (which was what peasants, like shepherds, did with their newly born children). Furthermore, they were told that he was lying in a *manger!* That is, they would find the Christ child in an ordinary peasant home such as theirs. He was not in a governor’s mansion or a wealthy merchant’s guest room but in a simple two-room home like theirs. This was *really* good news. Perhaps they would not be told, “Unclean shepherds—be gone!” This was *their sign*, a sign for lowly shepherds.

With this special sign of encouragement, the shepherds proceeded to Bethlehem in spite of their “low degree” (Lk 1:52). On arrival they reported their story and everyone was amazed. Then they left “praising God for all that they had heard and seen.” The word *all* obviously included *the quality of the hospitality* that they witnessed on arrival. Clearly, they found the holy family in perfectly adequate accommodations, not in a dirty stable. If, on arrival, they had found a smelly stable, a frightened young mother and a desperate Joseph, they would have said, “This is outrageous! Come home with us! Our women will take care of you!” Within five

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<sup>18</sup>Joachim Jeremias, “Despised Trades and Jewish Slaves,” in *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 303-4.

<sup>19</sup>J. D. M. Derrett, “Law in the New Testament: The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” *New Testament Studies* 14 (1967): 66, n. 1.

<sup>20</sup>Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, pp. 303-12.

minutes the shepherds would have moved the little family to their own homes. The honor of the entire village would rest on their shoulders and they would have sensed their responsibility to do their duty. The fact that they walked out, without moving the young family, means that the shepherds felt they could not offer better hospitality than what had already been extended to them.

Middle Eastern people have a tremendous capacity for showing honor to guests. This appears as early as the story of Abraham and his guests (Gen 18:1-8) and continues to the present. The shepherds left the holy family while praising God for the birth of the Messiah and for the quality of the hospitality in the home in which he was born. This is the capstone to the story of the shepherds. The child was born for the likes of the shepherds—the poor, the lowly, the rejected. He also came for the rich and the wise who later appear with gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Matthew informs his readers that the wise men entered *the house* where they saw Mary and the child (Mt 2:1-12). The story in Matthew confirms the suggestion that Luke's account describes a birth in a private home.

With this understanding in mind, all the cultural problems I have noted are solved. Joseph was not obliged to seek a commercial inn. He does not appear as an inept and inadequate husband who cannot arrange for Mary's needs. Likewise, Joseph did not anger his wife's relatives by failing to turn to them in a crisis. The child was born in the normal surroundings of a peasant home sometime after they arrived in Bethlehem, and there was no heartless innkeeper with whom to deal. A member of the house of David was not humiliated by rejection as he returned to the village of his family's origins. The people of Bethlehem offered the best they had and preserved their honor as a community. The shepherds were not hardhearted oafs without the presence of mind to help a needy family of strangers.

Our Christmas crèche sets remain as they are because "ox and ass before him bow, / for he is in the manger now." But that manger was in a warm and friendly home, not in a cold and lonely stable. Looking at the story in this light strips away layers of interpretive mythology that have built up around it. Jesus was born in a simple two-room village home such as the Middle East has known for at least three thousand years. Yes, we must rewrite our Christmas plays, but in rewriting them, the story is enriched, not cheapened.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Open Hearts in Bethlehem* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005). This is a Christmas musical constructed around the ideas presented here.

### **SUMMARY: THE STORY OF JESUS' BIRTH**

1. Jesus' incarnation was complete. At his birth the holy family was welcomed into a peasant home. These people did their best and it was enough. At his birth the common people sheltered him. The wise men came to the *house*. When Jesus was an adult, the common people heard him gladly.
2. The shepherds were welcome at the manger. The unclean were judged to be clean. The outcasts became honored guests. The song of angels was sung to the simplest of all.

I know that in an increasingly secular world "Merry Christmas" competes with "Happy Holidays." I long to turn the traditional "Merry Christmas" the other direction and introduce a new greeting for Christmas morning.

Greeting: The Savior is born.

Response: He is born in a manger.

O that we might greet each other in this manner.